

WHAT'S NEXT?

by Paul Rademacher

"What's next? ... What am I supposed to be doing now? ... I gotta get to work. ... Can you take me? ... What am I supposed to do? ... What are we doing now? ... Ok, what's next?"

The litany would go on like that for hours. It was one of the most maddening aspects of my father's Alzheimer's. No matter how many times we would assure him that there was nothing he needed to do, it was impossible to distract him from his fixation on activity. It was as if he had no concept, disposition, or language for "nondoing." That puzzled me no end.

Over the last decade a number of researchers have discovered that there are two neural networks that come into play in human experience. One, the "extrinsic network," has been widely studied. It springs to life when we are engaged in externally oriented tasks, in "doing." The other neural network, which has been largely understudied, comes into play when we are in an internally focused, self-reflective mode. This is the "default" network. An important finding of this emerging research is that, for most people, these two networks do not coexist simultaneously. When one system comes online, the other system essentially shuts down.

Could it be that my father's obsession with doing had something to do with how Alzheimer's affected his default system? Dr. Marcus Raichle, a neurologist at the Washington University School of Medicine in Missouri, has this to say: "If you look at Alzheimer's Disease, and you look at whether it attacks a particular part of the brain, what's amazing is that it actually attacks the default mode network" (see Danzico, 2011).

In other words, it would appear that Alzheimer's took away my father's neural capacity to move inward and engage in self-reflection. All that was left was the task-oriented "doing" portion of his brain. This "doing" framed his self-conception, and he was frantic if there was no activity to offer him a sense of purpose.

I can't help but wonder if Alzheimer's might be a metaphor for something that is happening at a societal level. In contemporary Western culture, the pace of life seems to be accelerating exponentially and the time for self-reflection has been all but eliminated from our daily experience. It is as if we are living proof that the two neural networks cannot exist simultaneously. Is it any wonder that we feel so disconnected, antsy, and lost? Could it be that our default system has atrophied from disuse and that we are missing something of profound importance?

In a study by Dr. Zoran Josipovic at New York University, the brains of 20 Buddhist monks were scanned via functional magnetic resonance imaging to look at the effects of meditation. What he discovered is that in long-term meditators, both the extrinsic and the default neural systems could be active at the same time (Danzico, 2011). Clearly this is a very different way of experiencing reality. It is a way of experiencing that is familiar to many of our graduates. It seems that the process of exploring the inner world at The Monroe Institute® has the simultaneous effect of slowing down our interaction with extrinsic experience. As we learn how to hold inner states of focus while interacting with the external world, we begin to experience the environment as alive and as communicating with us all the time. In the process there is a remembering of who we are at a deep level. Our place in the universe is framed differently, and our sense of purpose is enhanced. This dialogue between the default and extrinsic neural networks opens up a new way of being.

I have now reached the age of my father when he first started showing signs of Alzheimer's. The questions surrounding this disease are not academic for me. That's one reason the work of The Monroe Institute is so important for me, for I am convinced that exploration of the inner landscape holds the key to a wholeness that was elusive to my father. And though that wholeness remains just as elusive for many in our contemporary world, it is clear that things are shifting. Each person who discovers this new way of being has an impact on the collective consciousness. That process is the essence of the evolution of human consciousness. And that is truly "What's next."

References

Danzico, M. (2011). Brains of Buddhist monks scanned in meditation study. (Originally published April 28, 2011 by BBC Mobile News, US & Canada). Retrieved on May 1, 2011, from "sleepcompass . com/2011/04/brains-ofbuddhist- monks-scanned-in-meditation-study"

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